

"PRESERVING A DUXBURY HERITAGE"

By Wm. Lord McKinney, Curator Duxbury Rural & Historical Society

The Tercentenary marker for the historic Ford Store gives the locale as

N 85 W 43°

Thus stating in nautical terms its association with the sea. The store's fame as the "first department store in America" grew with the rise of the shipping industry in Duxbury and faded with its passing. The Tercentenary Committee, especially Dr. Reuben Peterson's committee on markers, served notice that it was prepared to defend with evidence the proposition that it was the first and forerunner of the department store idea in this country. Dr. Peterson also stressed the committee's eagerness to answer any counter claim or the presentation of any evidence but apparently no opposition appeared.

It was said that there was an element of mystery surrounding the store. To some it savored somewhat of pirates and rum. It was the gathering place of old and young, all interested in the display of merchandise. The cost of provisions in those days may be judged by the prices that follow - Molasses and N.E. Rum each sold locally at 35¢ a gallon, Tea - 56¢ a pound, Tobacco - 5¢ for 1/4 pound, Pair of Shoes - 50¢.

The Ford Brothers owned or controlled the grist mill and they owned a sloop, the "Mink" which ran from Bourne's Wharf at the foot of Duck Hill as a packet to different ports along the Eastern coast. In exchange for local products the sloop also brought grain for the grist mill. Of course it was from across the sea whence came the bulk of merchandise, some few by stage coach, but the "Mink" pursued its course with steadfastness from 1828 to the coming of the railroad in nearby Plymouth.

This Ford Store picture is from the well known painting by the late Robert Gregory Gifford now exhibited in the Historical Society rooms. I recall chatting with the artist just a few months prior to his death. He enjoyed telling his memories of the Ford Store and his work on the painting just a year before the store was destroyed by fire in the year 1921. He told me of the interest which the painting seemed to have created and said that Ford Automobile Company had written and asked his permission to reproduce the painting in a Ford publication to which he had apparently agreed. A visitor in our Historical Society rooms chanced to inquire of the artist as to what was in the baskets, "Did it happen to be clams?" Mr. Gifford replied with a smile that they did not carry clams to the market in those days for they were abundant. Speaking of clams one often hears of a visitor tackling steamed clams for the first time and of the ladies trying to worry the clams out of the shells with knife and fork. About Duxbury clams and our famed clam chowder I recall a verse from a poem a generation ago by J.B. Sheridan, an official of the Marine Fisheries:

"They can advertise prime ribs of beef
Put big "Gold Seals" on hams
But you can't beat a chowder sweet
Made of good sweet Duxb'ry clams."

It is often said that Daniel Webster, a frequent visitor and at times a willing helper at the Ford Store, was fond of serving to special house guests his own variety of Duxbury clam chowder.

Dr. Reuben Peterson, a generation ago, wrote about the splendid type of men and women produced by the age of the Westons and said the wonder is not that the business declined as clipper ships began to be built, but that ships of such tonnage could have been built at all on a narrow and shallow river leading into a tidal harbor with shallow twisting channels. And smaller vessels were even launched across the highways. Gradually the machine age was approaching and the older methods had to be displaced.

Perhaps too little has been written about how our shipping inspired other arts. Through the generations there grew up, almost along side the building of shops, separate and apart, a vigorous interest and devotion to literature and arts.

Justin Winsor, one of the most distinguished among American historians, came from a long line of shipbuilders and sea captains yet strange to relate his brilliant history of Duxbury fails to adequately relate the glorious achievements of Duxbury shipping.

"The Courtship of Myles Standish," was probably the result of Timothy Alden, its first narrator, visiting his kindred in Duxbury and being alert enough to preserve our most beautiful legend for future generations. Longfellow simply elaborated the story taken from Timothy Alden's recital.

Probably Justin Winsor could have related a romance almost as vital as Longfellow's masterpiece of John and Priscilla. Last week we presented a picture of the Justin Winsor house, a painting by Dr. Rufus Hathaway, whose works of art are highly prized and later in this series we will present his "King Caesar 1st".

In the closing years of the 18th century when it is said that Rufus Hathaway was arduously endeavoring to capture on his canvas the charm of the Joshua Winsor bay-side residence, legends relate his vision caught the grace and beauty of Joshua's daughter Judith. Perhaps it was Judith who bought a wedding garment in England which I mentioned in my previous article, from the proceeds of a consignment of fish sent abroad by Joshua, but there was a hitch in the wedding plans. It seems that father Joshua had doubts concerning an artist's ability to maintain a charming wife in the manner to which she was accustomed. To solve the problem Rufus then and there decided to study and follow the profession of medicine. Dr. Rufus was chosen to do the portraits of several of the Westons and his fame continues to climb. Some of his portraits are a treasured possession of the Graham T. Winslow family. A copy of his portrait of Ezra Weston the 1st, now hangs in the historical rooms, a reminder of a glorious heritage.

(The third in this series will appear in the next issue of the Duxbury Clipper)

merchandising.

The only eyewitness to the fire I have been able to discover is Fred Soule of Trémont St., who has retired in Duxbury after a distinguished career in flight testing rotary wing aircraft. Fred adds a singular sensual touch in his recollection of the fire: hot canned peaches. His family lived on the opposite hill to the north and he remembers well being routed out of bed in the dark of that frigid night and running down the hill and up the bank opposite the fire. He says there were only a handful of observers on hand standing in silent helpless desperation as the great building burst into surging towers of flame seemingly from all sides at once. It was several minutes before any fire apparatus arrived. Fred sat with the others till dawn broke and the flames subsided and then he walked down to see if anything was left in the ashes. He kicked a 2-quart-size unopened can out onto the ground and when it had cooled opened it and enjoyed a breakfast of warmed peaches! Crowds of people swarmed around the fire site the next several days; there was much talk of arson, since the speed of incineration and its completeness could not be explained any other way. A lawsuit was entered against Pat Boyle, but came to nothing.

It would have been impossible to save the store, but looking back a series of mishaps added to the destructive delays. There was first the delay in notification. When a neighbor phoned in the alarm it was already too late to save it. There was some delay in getting through "Central" as the town switchboard was then called. No. 2 fire truck left the engine house promptly enough, but lost its hose cart on the way and arrived all ready to hook into the relatively new town water supply (it was completed only in 1914) only to find there was not enough hose in the truck to reach the fire. The volunteer firemen were not called in time to respond effectively. Chief Blanchard has described the response to that fire as a "comedy of errors."

It is perhaps too extreme to say that such a devastating fire could not happen in Duxbury today, but it is highly unlikely. First of all there is a regional automatic radio network that immediately notifies all surrounding towns of fire information. This is an independent network free from dependence on any other communications system and manned on a 24-hour basis. Then, too, we have full-time around-the-clock fire fighters trained to do their job. In a bedroom town that Duxbury has become, reliance on volunteers is unrealistic.

That is not to say that volunteer firemen haven't done yeomen service in the past. They have constituted the backbone of our defense against all forms of danger. The point of the Ford Store fire and others like it that ended more happily is that there was this band of stalwarts who at the drop of a hat would rush to rescue anyone in danger as our fire department does now.

I hope to show in more detail how these volunteers gave of their time and energy to train themselves for the times they were called to duty over the years past.

This duty often involved working with inadequate equipment, and I hope also to show in further articles how that peppy little Model T was preceded by various other forms of fire apparatus, then succeeded by other more powerful and practical machines we see on the 4th of July every year. It is important to recall with admiration the work our fire department accomplished since 1834 when we bought the first handtubs till today, when our equipment is second to none.

Of course I loved that little Model T with its 2 50-gallon tanks and 100 feet of scarcely more than garden hose. It was outclassed by the prestigious Brockway that was bought in 1923 and consigned to fighting forest fires. This she was well fitted for, being high wheeled and short of wheel base so she could go right where the fire was. I feared for her safety in this kind of milieu, but she continued to respond to the call of duty until one day she was finally overwhelmed.

It was in the beach cottage fire of the spring of 1941 at Ocean Bluff, when 400-500 houses were leveled in a matter of minutes. The little Model T had ventured right into the jaws of death there and was consumed in that holocaust. The *Boston Globe* photo of the fire aftermath the next morning showed my valiant little fire wagon in the center, burned to a crisp but still standing defiantly. You could say she died with her boots on. The town of Marshfield presented us with a Model A in gratitude for her work. It is presently in service at the Ashdod Station.

Although I didn't actually go to the fire that destroyed a great Duxbury institution, I felt I did have a minor role in the action, since I was serving as janitor for Station No. 1 (at the munificent salary of \$10 a month) and my job was to keep a little pot-bellied coal stove aglow night and day. Its warmth enabled Waldo Herrick to crank the Model T engine that much more easily and start her on her way more speedily as she roared out the firehouse door that fateful night.